



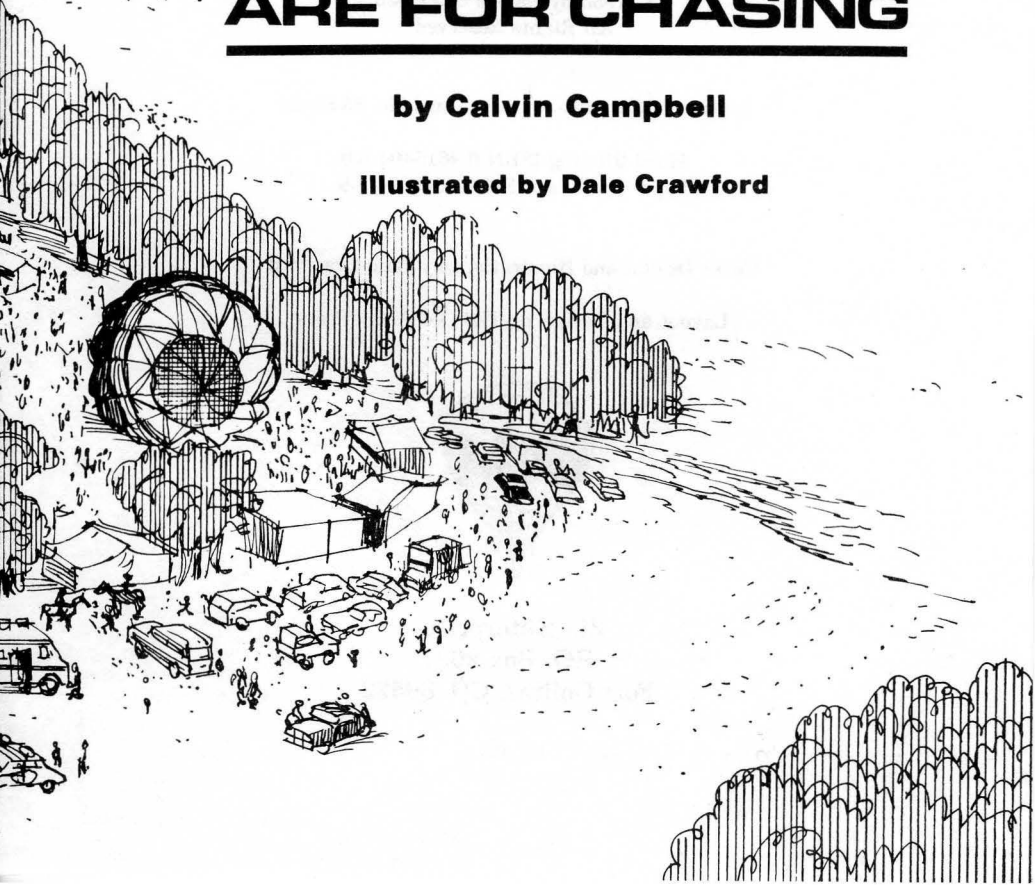


BALLOONS

ARE FOR CHASING

by Calvin Campbell

Illustrated by Dale Crawford



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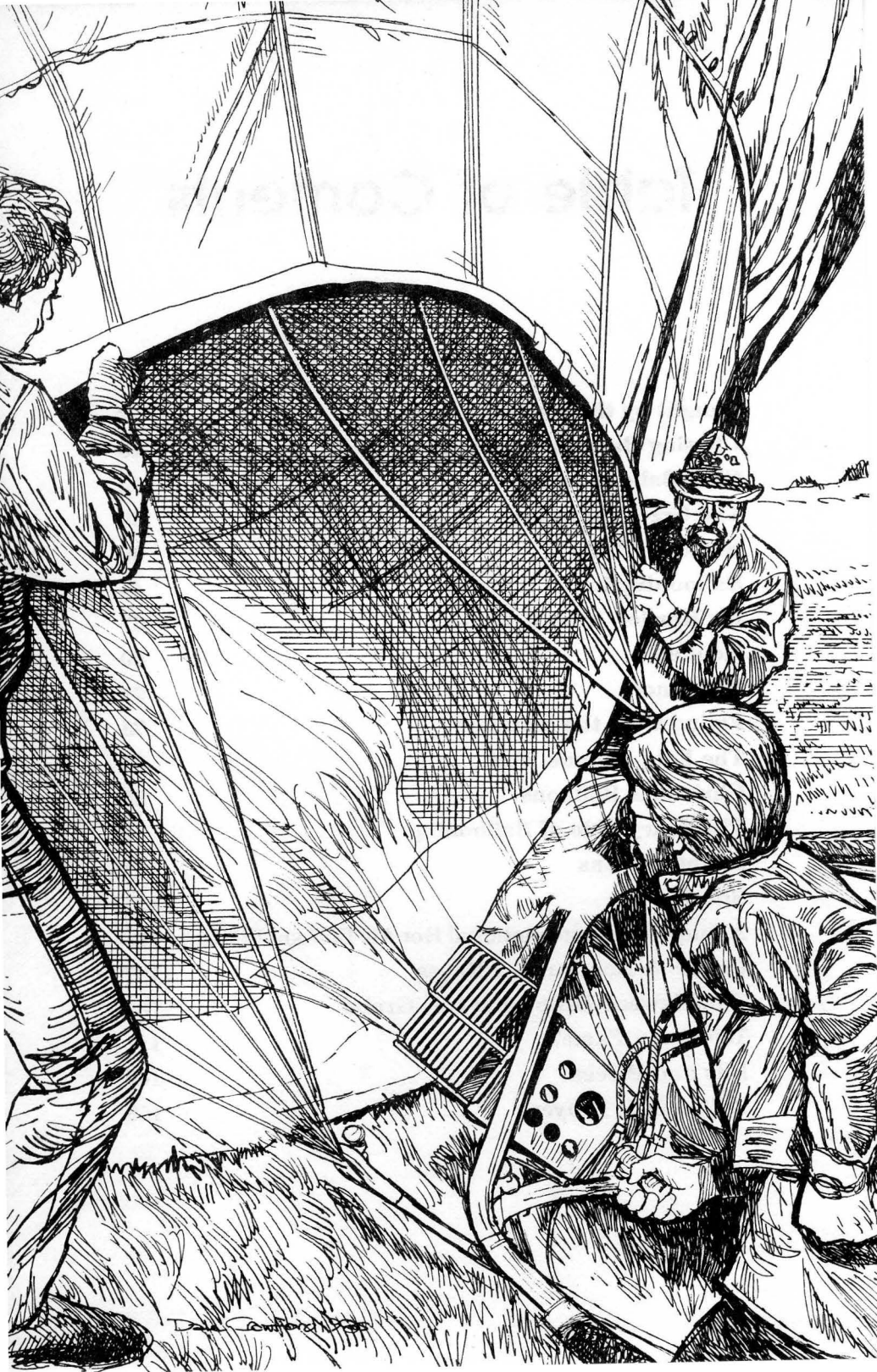
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Chapter 1

Caught by the Throat

I swear, the phone went off just after I had finally gone to sleep. I fumbled for it, knocked it to the floor, and finally located the end of the receiver with the cord on it and mumbled, "Hello."

A cheery voice on the other end of the line said, "It looks like a good morning. Let's go fly a balloon."

It hit me . . . today was the day we had been invited to be on the chase crew for George's hot air balloon.

"OK," I said peering at the clock on the night stand. It looked like it wasn't even five o'clock yet. "When do you want us to meet you?" It was still dark out and I was hoping he would say in a couple of hours.

"I've got the pickup loaded," the still disgustingly cheery voice replied. "I'll be at the launch site in about 45 minutes."

I must admit the adrenalin was almost starting to pump, but it still seemed like a ridiculous hour to do anything except crawl back into a warm bed and forget the whole idea. Still, I had promised my family we would go, and I knew that if I didn't move this tired aching body there would be howls of anguish when they found out we hadn't gone just because I wanted to sleep.

"Dad, are we going?" Philip said as he poked his head around the edge of the door. He was our youngest son and just barely into junior high school.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess," I mumbled. He disappeared from sight with a whoop and I picked the phone up off the floor and

hung up the receiver. The rest of the family was obviously going to be much easier to get moving than I was. I shook Judy, my wife, by the shoulder and shuffled down the hall to get the other two kids out of bed. Laurlie, the oldest, bounded out of bed like she had been lying there awake for several hours. She and Kevin, our middle child, were both in high school. Getting Kevin moving was a little like prodding an old hog sleeping in the shade. There was a lot of grunting and groaning, but finally he got up and staggered into the kitchen rubbing sleep out of his eyes. I think he felt a little like I did.

After I'd gulped two cups of coffee, we headed for the desert. The morning air was cold and in the predawn light we could see the cloud cover was composed only of a few puffs and wisps that were turning pink from the rising sun, still just below the horizon. I had made a lifetime habit of seldom seeing this end of the day. I wasn't about to admit it was kind of pretty.

According to the map George had given us the previous day, we were to meet him at a site on the New Mexico desert west of Albuquerque. We followed the directions through the small community of Rio Rancho until the pavement quit; then we were on a teeth rattling county road. I peered through the windshield at the still gray desert and thought about how we had gotten to this point.

We had watched the hot air balloons fly many times and had even followed them once in a while in our jeep station wagon. They were fascinating to watch as they floated across the valley and as the months went by, it became a game to try to see if we couldn't beat the chase crew to where the balloon touched down. We got to be fairly good at being able to anticipate the movements of the balloons and could often either beat the chase crew or at least be right behind them. We finally decided that we wanted to see what it was like to be on a chase crew full time. But how to go about it?

It turned out to be quite easy. First we picked out a pilot named George who seemed to know what he was doing. This was rather important because some of the pilots seemed to consistently land in awkward or inaccessible places. Then we watched for his balloon and trailed it to where he landed. We would help hold the gondola steady while he changed passengers and help lift the basket into the truck after his crew

had packed the balloon. We were careful to be helpful and still try to stay out of the way. After trailing George's balloon several times, he said, "Why don't you come out and help me launch sometime?"

So here we were, rattling across the desert looking for a spot, only vaguely described on the map, at an hour when people with any good sense would have been home in a warm and cozy bed.

The launch site was located about in the middle of a large land development area that's typical of the southwest. A developer had crisscrossed the desert with roads for five or more miles in every direction and marked them with faded street signs and not too much more. The land had long since been sold to hopeful people from the east who had a dream of retiring to a life of warm days and uncrowded roadways. The actual city was still far to the east and, this far out, little things like electricity and water were still only a dream. Out here the desert hardly seemed disturbed by the roads running through it and most of the street signs had fallen over and were buried beneath the drifting sand.

"Dad, I see some cars," a voice said from the back seat.

Out in the middle of nowhere were twenty to thirty vehicles strung out along the country road. Several other cars with trailers or pickups with balloon baskets setting in the back were scattered out over a large open area. People stood around in small knots, talking with their shoulders hunched over against the chill and sipping steaming coffee from cups. I was always surprised at how cold the desert got at night, even in midsummer. I could imagine the picture the sight might have presented to a sleepy shepherd returning from a night on the town.

It seemed a shame to leave a nice warm car to stand out in the cold dawn, but since everyone else was outside I didn't want to appear like a tenderfoot. After all, if you are going to be a member of a balloon chase crew, you must at least look like you know what you are doing. The cold desert air hit me like a knife as I opened the car door, but George had spotted us and it was way too late to retreat.

"Hi!" he said and hugged Judy.

I didn't think about it at the time, but hugging is one of the most practical things about ballooning. It gives you a brief moment to have something warm against one side and it makes you feel like there may be something better coming after all. Right now I was wishing I had stayed home in bed.

"You look like you could use a cup of coffee," George said to me as we steered our way across the field. I needed more than a cup of coffee. I accepted a mug of something hot and bitter and tried to smile.

"Do you people always start this early?" I asked.

"Always," George replied. "In the summer time, the later we start the more chance we have to hit thermals. Besides, it's a beautiful morning." I couldn't have disagreed more, but it seemed futile to argue with someone who was so darn cheerful. George was probably somewhere in his thirties and a bachelor. He was easy going and had a kind of devil-may-care attitude that had attracted us from the first time we met him. He had been flying hot air balloons for several years and was highly respected by other balloonists.

By the time we had been introduced to several people, the sun was peeking over the horizon and people started moving back to their chase vehicles. The desert looked a lot more inviting with sunlight casting long shadows and, when you turned your back to the sun, the warmth could be felt on your shoulders. The gray predawn look was gone and bright patches of color appeared here and there where the small desert flowers were growing.

We walked over to George's pickup and peered at the balloon gear. His balloon gondola looked much like a huge triangular flower basket and was made of wicker. A wood frame extended up from each of the three sides and joined in a triangle at the top. Suede leather covered the padded top of the basket and most of the three upright frames. We grabbed handles along the bottom of the gondola and slid it out of the pickup onto the ground. It was heavier than I expected; then I remembered the three ten gallon propane tanks strapped in the corners were now filled with fuel.

The next item was a large canvas bag. This contained the envelope, which is the large cloth part of the balloon. It took two people to carry it to where George pointed.

Then came something which looked like an airplane motor that had lost the airplane. This, we were told, was called an inflator. It was mainly a gasoline motor and a wooden airplane prop enclosed in a protective wire grill and mounted on a metal frame complete with handles and wheels for rolling it around.

George installed the burner in the triangle at the top of the uprights and attached several hoses from the propane tanks. The burner was a gleaming metal contraption which looked like it belonged in a science fiction movie; it was used to heat the air inside the envelope. Next an instrument panel was bolted into the interior of the gondola. Once George was satisfied with the assembly of all this equipment, he gathered us around and explained ground crew procedures and safety. "Never move fast around a balloon. There is plenty of time to do everything and we are here to relax . . . Watch your feet! One of the easiest things in the world is to not watch where you are going and to step on the envelope and tear it. Stay away from the side of the inflator. It is safe when handled properly, but it can hurt you if you walk into it. Respect the burner. It shoots a flame about thirty feet and the last place you want to be is in front of it."

When he finished each of us was given an assignment. I was to hold open one side of the throat. This was the large opening in the bottom of the envelope where the heat was fed into the interior of the balloon. Judy and Kevin were to help on the crown line. Laurlie was to watch along one side of the balloon and Philip was to run the inflator.

Holding the throat open sounded like an easy job but George had grinned when he said it. We laid the gondola on its side, opened the storage bag and hooked up several sets of steel cables from the envelope to the gondola. Two people grabbed the bag and walked away from the gondola and the envelope came pouring out like a long colorful scarf made for some dragon. After fooling around with several ropes and cables, George came back and separated out several cables coming out of the opening in the bottom of the envelope and handed them to me.

"Hold these tight and as close to the throat of the balloon as you can," he said. "We are going to start the inflator and blow

cold air into the envelope. Don't get your feet tangled in the cables and watch out for the burner."

Burner? Oh, my gosh—the burner! I looked down and about three feet from my leg was the gleaming metal thing that looked like a ray gun from a space movie. I had visions of my leg disappearing like a tumbleweed burning in a high wind. Holding the throat took on a new meaning. I opened my mouth to say something, but George had disappeared and my children were looking at me like I was really doing something important.

About that time the inflator engine coughed to life and a blast of cold air hit me where I was already cold. The cables started to tug at my hand and as I looked over my shoulder, I could see the envelope begin to ripple open. I looked at my partner on the other side of the throat. He seemed calm, cool, and collected and leaned into the blasting wind from the inflator, holding the throat open to gulp in the blast of air.

Now "cool" I could relate to, but calm and collected were not descriptive terms in my case. As I watched the fabric heave itself off the ground and round out into a multicolored form far higher than my head, it seemed to tug at my hands like some huge bird wanting to be free. I wondered if I hadn't grabbed the proverbial tiger by the tail. Boy! I wished I could take time to go to the bathroom. One thing about it, though, I sure wasn't sleepy any more.

George showed up from time to time to peer into the balloon or to arrange some cord or another a different way. Finally he seemed satisfied and stepped in between the uprights on the gondola and adjusted valves in the basket.

"Gas coming on," he hollered above the roar of the inflator.

Then he was striking a spark to some tubes at the head of the burner. I checked my feet to be sure they were out of the way of the lower cables and wondered how well my pants would burn.

"Pilot's lit," shouted George.

He looked over at me and asked, "Are you all right?"

My stomach turned a flip-flop, but I nodded yes. I really didn't want my children to see me running across the desert.

"Here we go!" George shouted and a loud roar hit my ears and heat rolled up and around me. A long finger of blue flame

poured out of the top of the burner and the balloon moved lightly in my hand.

I was amazed. Nothing else happened. My pants didn't smoke and my shaking hands held onto the cables. After two or three more short blasts George turned the burner on full blast. The balloon floated away from the ground and majestically rose upright, like a giant coming out of a long sleep. As the cables tightened the gondola was pulled upright and George stepped into the center of the basket without letting go of the flaming burner.

"Weight on the basket," he called above the roar of the burner. The sides of the envelope filled out as the heated air pushed from within.

Abruptly it was quiet and we stood beneath a huge canopy of fabric that had miraculously changed from a wrinkled pile on the ground to a living breathing entity waiting to fly away into the sky. Looking around I saw we were surrounded by other balloons standing or awaiting their turn in various stages of inflation.

George called the passengers who were to fly in the first ride into the basket, set the instruments, and checked the fuel tanks.

He turned to me and grinned, "You jumped a little when the burner went off the first time."

"I know," I said in a shaky voice.

"That's OK. At least you held on," he said. He looked around at the other balloons and then asked someone to clear him above. An experienced crew member ran out to see if anyone was above him and waved the all-clear signal.

"Please weigh off," George said. With that the balloon drifted slowly into the air.

"The captain compliments the crew," George called from above and tipped his hat to those on the ground.

As I watched the balloon climb into the bright blue sky, I realized I wasn't cold any more.